

# ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS

ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, *AUTODESTRUCCIÓN 8: SINBYEONG*, (*Self-Destruction 8: Sinbyeong*), 2015, found objects from redevelopment areas in Seoul, variable dimensions, installation view Art Sonje Center / *SELBSTZERSTÖRUNG 8: SINBYEONG*, gefundene Gegenstände aus Sanierungsgebieten in Seoul, Masse variabel, Installationsansicht.  
(ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND KURIMANZUTTO, MEXICO; THOMAS DANE GALLERY, LONDON, AND GALERIE CHANTAL CROUSEL, PARIS / PHOTO: KIM TAEDONG)

TOM McDONOUGH

# The Berlin Wall

In 2008, while on a residency in Scotland, Abraham Cruzvillegas began writing song lyrics. He has described their style as “a hybrid combination of inspiring sources, such as romantic popular music from Mexico, folk music, boleros, dub, rock’n’roll, salsa, reggae, Brazilian music, corridos, punk, ska, cumbia, trova Yucateca, funk, protest music from Latin America during the seventies, commercial pop from everywhere, norteñas, hip-hop, etc.”<sup>1)</sup> The songs are reminiscences of his childhood during the 1970s and ’80s in an informal settlement in Ajusco, at what was then the southern edge of Mexico City; as such, they are coextensive with the origin of his AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN (Self-Construction, 2007– ) works and reflect many of the same concerns of this ongoing series of mixed-media sculptures, whose point of departure is the improvised methods of construction found in Ajusco and other squatter communities throughout Latin America. Alternately humorous and poignant, militant and intimate, Cruzvillegas’s lyrics speak of growing up in a peri-urban zone marked by insecur-

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rity, insufficiency, and solidarity. Each song, we could say, holds a lesson, but some in particular seem to provide a broader reflection on the structural parameters not only of the *colonia* of Cruzvillegas’s youth but also of his current artistic practice.

That’s the case with “El muro de Berlín” (The Berlin Wall, 2010), a song about a fence erected to separate two adjacent neighborhoods, the “hoity-toity and cocky” Colonia Romero de Terreros and the “proletarian” Pedregal de Santo Domingo, “full of argumentative plebs.”<sup>2)</sup> The wall, a product of intolerance, is also a monument to hypocrisy: If the inhabitants of these quarters “mutually despised one another,” they also “needed each other desperately”:

*Some were masons, plumbers and domestics,  
Metalworkers, carpenters, painters, body shop workers,  
And the others hired them at low rates.*

If the wall appears physically as a barrier, as an absolute dividing line between these socially divergent settlements, its actual function is revealed to be more complex. It acts more as a membrane, allowing labor and money to pass through while filtering out

ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, THE AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN SUITES (The Self-Construction Suites), 2013, installation view Walker Art Center / DIE EIGENBAU-FOLGEN, Installationsansicht.



ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, *ILS SONT ZAZOUS (DEMOCRATIST & ENGAGED)*, 2012, rebar, fabric, feathers, chain, meat, 35 x 135 x 30" / *SIE SIND ZAZOUS (DEMOKRAT & BESCHÄFTIGT)*, Armierungseisen, Stoff, Kette, Fleisch, 88,9 x 342,9 x 76,2 cm.



the social costs of this uneven division of land and wealth, embodied in the excretions—the piss, shit, and garbage—that pile up on one side. As Cruzvillegas writes, “It was important to work and to survive / With the other, without the other, and despite the other.”

“The Berlin Wall” is, on one hand, a vivid observation of this singular location, of the thin line that divides and conjoins these two districts. But on the other, it is a reflection on the dynamic that propels Cruzvillegas’s sculptural practice, which also posi-

tions itself between two worlds, one proletarian and the other posh. As the artist has explained in regard to the AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN project, “Many of these works express my wish to confront two or more radically different economic systems, creating hybrid marriages and unexpected combinations of materials and techniques.”<sup>3)</sup> Of course, these marriages and combinations are evident within individual works, whether we want to label them assemblage, bricolage, or, as Mark Godfrey has convincingly argued, “structural juxtaposition.”<sup>4)</sup> *THE INVINCIBLE* (2003), for example, crowns a rough, heavy piece of concrete—as it features the number 190 in paint, we assume it is a fragment from a house—with a colorful array of feathers, composing a sort of avian Mohawk. Its title refers to a particular locale, as is often the case in Cruzvillegas’s work: here, a bar frequented by artists, actors, and others in San Ángel, just off of Mexico City’s great longitudinal axis, Insurgentes, north of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, where he studied in the 1980s.

But the confrontation of “radically different economic systems” must be seen as also taking place external to the singular sculptural object. When *LA INVENCIBLE* is exhibited, for example, in Cruzvillegas’s 2013 survey at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, we are compelled to see it, and the rest of

ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, *APRIL IN PARIS (BRIEF & DELIRIOUS)*, 2012, rebar, fabric, feathers, chain, beer bottle caps, meat, 115 x 80 x 84" / *APRIL IN PARIS (KURZ & HEFTIG)*, Armierungseisen, Stoff, Federn, Bierdeckel, Fleisch, 292,1 x 203,2 x 213,4 cm.



his work, against the backdrop of the elegant white gallery space and to recognize it as an object that has traveled, so to speak, across the Berlin Wall separating its proletarian material origins from its current inhabitation of the decidedly hoity-toity and cocky environment of the global art market. Many critics only see Cruzvillegas’s art occupying one side of this fence: For them, it is an unproblematic translation into sculptural vocabulary of the informal and communal building methods he encountered as a child in Ajusco.<sup>5)</sup> However inspiring such accounts may be, they miss the larger institutional apparatuses within which his sculpture circulates. Only recently have those views been challenged, most notably by art historian Robin Adèle Greeley, who locates the work instead precisely “in the systemic interconnections between object experience in developing countries . . . and object experience in the hegemonic ‘centers’ of developed countries and the market-

driven international art circuit”—a position that allows him “to assert the asymmetries of object experience induced by global economic integration.”<sup>6)</sup>

Perhaps we could say that Cruzvillegas’s work occupies the *espace partagé*—the space both shared and divided—between those two experiences, those two economies. It’s a term borrowed from the great Brazilian geographer Milton Santos, who from exile in Paris wrote a book of the same title in 1975, in which he characterized countries like Mexico as having a dual economy, or what he called an economy of “two circuits.” Both were the outcome of contemporary technological modernization, but that process inevitably affected segments of the population unequally. There is an upper circuit, composed of capital-intensive modern industry, banking, export trade, and the like, which yields a higher income for those employed but which produces only a limited number of jobs; and a lower circuit, accounting for a

ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, *THE AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN SUITES (The Self-Construction Suites)*, 2013, installation view Walker Art Center / *DIE EIGENBAU-FOLGEN*, Installationsansicht.





ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, *AUTODESTRUCCIÓN 4: DEMOLICIÓN* (Self-Destruction 4: Demolition), 2014, installation view Thomas Dane Gallery, London / *SELBSTZERSTÖRUNG 4: DEMOLIERUNG*, Installationsansicht.

high ratio of people with neither stable employment nor income and “consisting of small-scale manufacturing and crafts, small-scale trade, and many varied services.”<sup>7)</sup> This is the circuit from which Cruzvillegas draws his raw materials, and it is the one to which he tends to refer when discussing his work. But it would be too simple to merely align him with this underprivileged realm; as Santos writes, the upper and lower circuits cannot be so neatly divided. What he calls a “shared space” does not denote a realm of equilibrium or cooperation but rather an agonistic space in which the social classes corresponding to the two circuits compete “for market hegemony and spatial control,” with the upper claiming “total unification and penetration of the market” and the lower seeking to assert “some role in aggregate spatial organization.”<sup>8)</sup>

Cruzvillegas occupies an ambivalent position in relation to this dynamic. Through professional standing he certainly qualifies as a member of the upper circuit, but his working methods and personal solidarities align him with the lower: It is not only a formal vocabulary that links him with his childhood home in Ajusco but also an ongoing set of familial and communal relationships that extend from his mother and father to the Comité de Derechos Humanos Ajusco (Ajusco Human Rights Committee). At its most complex, his work involves a negotiation *between* these two circuits, a shuttling from the international art world to the Latin American urban periphery and back, which acts to bring each term into opposition with the other. As Cruzvillegas writes in the short text that serves as something of a statement of intent for the AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN project, “My main purpose is

to generate knowledge and understanding of how human activity produces forms.”<sup>9)</sup> But we can be more specific: The significance of AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN is its lesson in how human activity produces forms *within* and *in spite of* the real social conditions of uneven development that their producers, including the artist, must necessarily inhabit.

Of course, which side prevails in this “negotiation” between upper and lower circuits remains up for debate. After all, the finished work exists entirely on one side of the divide: Whatever its origins in those continuous collaborative processes of building and rebuilding in the *colonia* that go under the name *autoconstrucción*, once Cruzvillegas’s artwork enters the gallery it is no longer subject to outside intervention. Despite its seeming precariousness, despite its “dynamic contingency,” it is a singularly authored object protected from any further change.<sup>10)</sup> As the artist reminds us in his song, if the wall has long come down in Berlin, the walls that separate the wealthy from the poor continue to stand.

But Cruzvillegas’s work, enmeshed in those conditions, also imagines another horizon beyond the present realities of our at once shared and divided space. In a song from 2008, “Aprons,” about the

militant role of women in the seizure and settlement of Ajusco, we are reminded, “The land belongs to those who work it / That’s what Zapata said.”<sup>11)</sup> The Mexican peasant revolutionary’s words, echoing across the decades, speak of the centrality of praxis, of human productivity as a mutual reshaping of the world; it is the same call we hear in the final lines of Bertolt Brecht’s *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, when the singer announces the moral of the play: “Take note of the meaning of the ancient song: / That what there is shall belong to those who are good for it . . . .”<sup>12)</sup> The AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN sculptures, without pretending to be free of all the contradictions that an economy of two circuits imposes upon them, nevertheless persist as something like promissory notes for a future in which that praxis will have been realized, in which all the Berlin Walls will have come down.

1) Abraham Cruzvillegas, quoted in Francis McKee, “Mutable & Mutual” in *Autoconstrucción: Abraham Cruzvillegas* (Glasgow: Centre for Contemporary Arts, 2008), 2.

2) The song was written during a 2010–11 DAAD residency in Berlin and set to music composed in collaboration with Gabriel Acevedo Velarde and Sebastian Gräfe, which the artist characterizes as “somewhere between punk three-chord strategy, sample dub tradition, rebajada’s ear-splitting, slow motion, hip-hop appropriation, and Tyrolese-Tibetan electro digital tunes.” See Abraham Cruzvillegas, ed., *The Self Builders’ Groove* (Berlin: Berliner Künstlerprogramm/DAAD, 2012), which includes a CD.

3) Abraham Cruzvillegas, “Autoconstrucción” in Clara Kim, *Abraham Cruzvillegas: The Autoconstrucción Suites* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2013), 26.

4) Mark Godfrey, “Instability and Fragmentation / Improvisation and Autoconstrucción: Abraham Cruzvillegas’s Sculpture” in *Autoconstrucción: The Book* (Los Angeles: REDCAT, 2009), 69–70.

5) See, for example, McKee, “Mutable & Mutual,” 1–3; or Catalina Lozano, “Making Is Thinking, Thinking Is Acting” in Kim, *Abraham Cruzvillegas*, 45–52, among others.

6) Robin Adèle Greeley, “The Logic of Disorder: The Sculptural Materialism of Abraham Cruzvillegas,” *October* 151 (Winter 2015): 82.

7) Milton Santos, *The Shared Space*, trans. Chris Gerry (London and New York: Methuen, 1979), 86.

8) *Ibid.*, 197.

9) Cruzvillegas, “Autoconstrucción,” 26.

10) Greeley, “The Logic of Disorder,” 79.

11) Abraham Cruzvillegas, “Aprons” in *Autoconstrucción: Abraham Cruzvillegas*, 82.

12) Bertolt Brecht, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, trans. James and Tania Stern, with W. H. Auden (London: Methuen, 1963), 96. On this moral, see Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 175–78.



ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, *THE INVINCIBLE*, 2002, rock, feathers, mixed media, 18 x 15 x 4 1/2" / *DIE UNBESIEGBARE*, Stein, Federn, verschiedene Materialien, 45,7 x 38,1 x 11,4 cm.

TOM McDONOUGH

# Die Berliner Mauer

Während eines Stipendiaufenthalts in Schottland 2008 begann Abraham Cruzvillegas Liedtexte zu schreiben. Den Stil dieser Texte beschreibt er als «hybride Verknüpfung von anregenden Quellen, wie romantische Schlager aus Mexiko, Volksmusik, Bole-ros, Dub, Rock 'n' Roll, Salsa, Reggae, brasilianische Musik, Corridos, Punk, Ska, Cumbia, Trova Yucateca, Funk, lateinamerikanische Protestsongs der 70er-Jahre, kommerzielle Popmusik aus aller Welt, Norteñas, Hip-Hop, und so weiter».<sup>1)</sup> Die Songs sind Erinnerungen an seine Kindheit in den 1970er- und 80er-Jahren in einer informellen Siedlung in Ajusco, das damals noch am südlichen Stadtrand von Mexico City lag; sie haben also denselben geographischen Ursprung wie seine AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN-Werke (Eigenbau-Werke) und sie greifen auch zahlreiche Themen aus der langfristig angelegten (2007 begonnenen) Mixed-media-Skulpturenserie wieder auf. Ausgangspunkt dieser Serie waren die improvisierten Bauformen in Ajusco und anderen Squattersiedlungen in ganz Lateinamerika. Bald humorvoll, bald schneidend, bald kämpferisch oder persönlich erzählen Cruzvillegas' Texte vom Heranwachsen in

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einem Stadtrandgebiet, das von Unsicherheit, unzulänglicher Versorgung und Solidarität geprägt ist. Jeder Text birgt sozusagen eine Lektion, aber einige scheinen auch eine speziellere, allgemeingültigere Reflexion zu enthalten, und zwar nicht nur zu den strukturellen Parametern der Siedlung seiner Jugendzeit, sondern auch zu denjenigen seiner heutigen Künstlertätigkeit.



ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, "The Self Builders' Groove," 2011, performance view, Berlin / «Der Eigenbauer-Groove», Performance-Ansicht. (PHOTO: KRZYSZTOF ZIELINSKI)



ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, "The Self Builders' Groove," 2011, performance view, Berlin / Der Eigenbauer-Groove, Performance-Ansicht. (PHOTO: KRZYSZTOF ZIELINSKI)

Das gilt insbesondere für «El muro de Berlín» (Die Berliner Mauer, 2010), ein Lied über einen zwischen zwei benachbarten Vierteln hochgezogenen Zaun, der die «blasierte und grosskotzige» Siedlung Romero de Terreros von dem «proletarischen» Pedregal de Santo Domingo trennt, einem Viertel «voll streitsüchtigem Pöbel».<sup>2)</sup> Die Mauer, ein Produkt der Intoleranz, ist auch ein Denkmal der Heuchelei: Obwohl die Bewohner dieser Viertel «einander gegenseitig verachteten», waren sie doch «auch absolut aufeinander angewiesen»:

*Manche waren Maurer, Klempner und Hausangestellte, Schlosser, Schreiner, Maler, Autospengler, Und die andern beschäftigten sie für wenig Geld.*

Während die Mauer physisch schlicht wie eine Barriere wirkt, eine absolute Trennlinie zwischen den

beiden sozial auseinanderklaffenden Siedlungen, ist ihre wahre Funktion wesentlich komplizierter. Sie hat eher die Funktion einer für Arbeit und Geld durchlässigen Membran, die jedoch die sozialen Kosten der ungleichen Verteilung von Grundbesitz und Reichtum herausfiltert, verkörpert durch die Ausscheidungen – Pisse, Scheisse und Abfall –, die sich auf der andern Seite anhäufen. Wie Cruzvillegas schreibt: «Es war wichtig, zu arbeiten und zu überleben / Mit dem anderen, ohne den anderen und trotz dem anderen.»

«El muro de Berlín» ist einerseits eine anschauliche Studie dieses spezifischen Ortes und der dünnen Linie, welche die beiden Stadtteile trennt und verbindet. Andererseits ist es aber auch eine Reflexion über die Antriebsdynamik von Cruzvillegas' skulpturaler Tätigkeit, die sich ebenfalls zwischen zwei Welten positioniert, die eine proletarisch, die an-



wir an, es sei das Bruchstück eines Hauses. Der Titel verweist, wie häufig in Cruzvillegas' Werk, auf einen bestimmten Ort, hier auf eine von Künstlern, Schauspielern und anderen Leuten frequentierte Bar in San Ángel, nahe der Avenida de los Insurgentes, der grossen Längsachse durch Mexico City, und nördlich der Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, wo der Künstler in den 1980er-Jahren studierte.

Doch diese Konfrontation «radikal verschiedener Wirtschaftssysteme» muss so verstanden werden, dass sie auch ausserhalb des einzelnen skulpturalen Objekts stattfindet. Wenn *THE INVENCIBLE* beispielsweise im Rahmen des Überblicks über Cruzvillegas' Werk 2013 im Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, gezeigt wird, bekommt man dieses und alle anderen Werke gezwungenermassen vor dem Hintergrund des eleganten weissen Ausstellungsraumes zu sehen. Und erkennt darin ein Objekt, das eine weite Reise hinter sich hat, quasi von jenseits der Berliner Mauer, die seine proletarische reale Herkunft von seinem aktuellen Aufenthaltsort in der unverkennbar «blasierten und grosskotzigen Umgebung» des zeitgenössischen Kunstmarktes trennt. Viele Kritiker betrachten Cruzvillegas' Kunst nur als ein Element der Welt auf dieser Seite des Zauns: Für sie handelt es sich dabei um eine unproblematische Übersetzung in das skulpturale Vokabular der informellen und gemeinschaftlichen Bauweisen, die er als Kind in Ajusco kennenlernte.<sup>5)</sup> So anregend solche Darstellungen sein mögen, übersehen sie doch das grössere institutionelle Gefüge, in dem sich seine Skulptur bewegt. Diese Auffassungen wurden denn auch erst jüngst von Grund auf in Frage gestellt, vor allem von der Kunsthistorikerin Robin Adèle Greeley, die das Werk von Cruzvillegas präzise «in den systemischen Verzahnungen zwischen der Objekterfahrung in Entwicklungsländern ... , der Objekterfahrung in den Herrschaftszentren der entwickelten Länder und dem marktgesteuerten internationalen Kunstkreislauf verortet» – eine Position, die es dem Künstler erlaube, «die Missverhältnisse der Objekterfahrung aufzuzeigen, die durch die wirtschaftliche Globalisierung entstanden sind».<sup>6)</sup>

Vielleicht könnte man sagen, dass Cruzvillegas' Werk im *espace partagé* wohnt – dem geteilten (ebenso gemeinsam geteilten wie zweigeteilten) Raum – zwi-

dere todschick. In Bezug auf sein Projekt *AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN* meinte der Künstler: «Viele dieser Arbeiten sind Ausdruck meines Wunsches, zwei oder mehr radikal verschiedene Wirtschaftssysteme miteinander zu konfrontieren und dabei hybride Verbindungen und unerwartete Verquickungen zwischen Materialien und Techniken herzustellen.»<sup>3)</sup> Natürlich sind diese Verbindungen und Verquickungen innerhalb

einzelner Werke augenfällig, egal ob wir sie als Assemblage, Bricolage oder – wie Mark Godfrey überzeugend dargelegt hat – als «strukturelles Nebeneinander»<sup>4)</sup> bezeichnen wollen. *THE INVENCIBLE* (Die Unbesiegbare, 2003) krönt beispielsweise ein raues, schweres Stück Beton mit einer bunten Federntracht, einer vogelartigen Irokesenfrisur – da das Betonfragment die aufgemalte Zahl 190 trägt, nehmen

ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, *EMPTY LOT*, 2015,  
Hyundai Commission, installation view Tate Turbine Hall /  
*LEERE PARZELLE*, Installationsansicht.  
(PHOTO: ANDREW DUNKLEY © TATE 2015)

ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, *AUTODESTRUCCIÓN 7: DESHACIENDO EL NUDO* (Self-Destruction 7: Undoing the Knot), 2015, installation view Museo de Arte, Lima / SELBSTZERSTÖRUNG 7: DEN KNOTEN AUFLÖSEN, Installationsansicht. (PHOTO: MUSUK NOLTE)



schen diesen beiden Erlebensweisen und Wirtschaftsformen. Der Ausdruck stammt von dem grossen brasilianischen Geographen Milton Santos, der 1975 im Pariser Exil ein Buch mit ebendiesem Titel schrieb, *L'Espace partagé*. Darin legt er dar, dass Länder wie Mexiko eine Doppelwirtschaft haben, oder wie er es nannte: eine Wirtschaft mit «zwei Kreisläufen»; beide sind Produkte des modernen technologischen Fortschritts, nur wirkte sich dieser Prozess nicht in allen Bevölkerungsschichten gleich aus. Es gibt einen oberen Kreislauf, bestehend aus der kapitalintensiven modernen Industrie, dem Bankwesen, dem Exporthandel und so fort, der für die Angestellten ein höheres Einkommen abwirft, aber nur eine begrenzte Anzahl von Arbeitsstellen schafft; und es gibt einen unteren Kreislauf für einen hohen Prozentsatz von Leuten, die keine feste Anstellung und kein regelmässiges Einkommen haben, «bestehend aus kleinen Fertigungs- und Handwerksbetrieben, Kleinhandel und vielfältigen Dienstleistungen».<sup>7)</sup> Aus diesem Kreislauf bezieht Cruzvillegas sein Rohmaterial, und auf ihn verweist er auch gerne, wenn er über seine Arbeit spricht. Dennoch wäre es zu einfach, ihn ausschliesslich diesem unterprivilegierten Bereich zuzuordnen; wie Santos schreibt, lassen sich der obere und der untere Kreislauf nicht sauber trennen. Sein «geteilter Raum» bezeichnet keinen Bereich des Gleichgewichts oder der Zusammenarbeit, sondern eher einen Bereich der Auseinandersetzung, in dem die den beiden Kreisläufen entsprechenden gesellschaftlichen Klassen «um die Marktvorherrschaft und die Kontrolle des Raumes» kämpfen, wobei die untere Klasse versucht, sich «eine Rolle innerhalb des gesamtwirtschaftlichen Raumes» zu sichern.<sup>8)</sup>

Innerhalb dieser Dynamik nimmt Cruzvillegas eine ambivalente Position ein. Aufgrund seines Berufsstandes ist er zweifellos dem oberen Kreislauf zuzurechnen, doch seine Arbeitsweisen und seine per-

sönliche Solidarität schweissen ihn mit dem unteren zusammen: Es ist nicht nur ein formales Vokabular, was ihn mit dem Zuhause seiner Kindheit in Ajusco verbindet, sondern auch eine ganze Reihe nach wie vor lebendiger familiärer und gemeinschaftlicher Beziehungen, die von seinen Eltern bis zum Comité de Derechos Humanos Ajusco (der Menschenrechtskommission von Ajusco) reichen. Im kompliziertesten Fall findet in seinem Werk eine Verhandlung zwischen diesen beiden Kreisläufen statt, ein stetiges Pendeln zwischen internationaler Kunstszene und lateinamerikanischer Stadtrandzone, das jede Aussage sogleich mit ihrem Gegenstück widerlegt. Wie Cruzvillegas in dem kurzen Text schreibt, der eine Art Absichtserklärung zu seinem Projekt AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN darstellt: «Es geht mir hauptsächlich darum, zu vermitteln und verständlich zu machen, wie durch das menschliche Handeln Formen geschaffen werden.»<sup>9)</sup> Im Klartext: Die Bedeutung von AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN liegt in der Lektion, wie durch das menschliche Handeln Formen geschaffen werden innerhalb und trotz der realen gesellschaftlichen Bedingungen einer ungleichen Entwicklung, denen alle Produzenten, auch der Künstler, notwendig unterworfen sind.

Natürlich bleibt noch zu erörtern, welche Seite in dieser «Verhandlung» zwischen dem oberen und

dem unteren Kreislauf die Oberhand behält. Immerhin befindet sich das vollendete Werk ganz auf der einen Seite der Kluft: Auf welche Ursprünge auch immer die – unter dem Namen *autoconstrucción* laufenden – andauernden gemeinschaftlichen Arbeitsprozesse des Bauens und Wiederaufbauens in der Colonia zurückgehen, sobald Cruzvillegas' Kunstwerk im Ausstellungsraum steht, ist es keinerlei Eingriffen von aussen mehr unterworfen. Trotz seiner prekären Situation, trotz seiner «dynamischen Kontingenz» ist es als singular geschaffenes Objekt vor jeder weiteren Veränderung geschützt.<sup>10)</sup> Wie der Künstler uns in seinem Lied in Erinnerung ruft: Auch wenn die Berliner Mauer längst gefallen ist, die Mauern zwischen Arm und Reich stehen nach wie vor.

Cruzvillegas' in diese Bedingungen verstricktes Werk entwirft jedoch auch einen weiteren Horizont jenseits der heutigen Realität unserer zugleich gemeinsamen und getrennten Räume. Das Lied «Aprons» (Schürzen, 2008), über die militante Rolle der Frauen bei der Inbesitznahme und Besiedlung von Ajusco, erinnert uns daran: «Das Land gehört denen, die darauf arbeiten / Das sagte schon Zapata.»<sup>11)</sup> Die Worte des mexikanischen Revolutionärs und Bauernführers, die über die Jahrzehnte nichts von ihrer Kraft eingebüsst haben, sprechen von der zentralen Bedeutung der Praxis, von der menschlichen Produktivität als gemeinschaftlicher Umgestaltung der Welt; es ist dieselbe Aufforderung, die wir in den letzten Zeilen von Bertolt Brechts *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* vernehmen, wo der Sänger die Moral des Stücks verkündet: «Nehmt zur Kenntnis die Meinung der Alten: / Dass da gehören soll, was da ist, denen, die für es gut sind [...]»<sup>12)</sup> Die AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN-Skulpturen behaupten nicht, von allen Widersprüchen frei zu sein, die mit der Wirtschaft der zwei Kreisläufe einhergehen, dennoch haben sie Gültigkeit, denn sie sind eine Art Versprechen oder Schuldschein für eine Zukunft, in der diese Praxis Realität sein wird und alle Berliner Mauern gefallen sein werden.

(Übersetzung: Suzanne Schmidt)

1) Abraham Cruzvillegas, zitiert in Francis McKee, «Mutable & Mutual», in *Autoconstrucción: Abraham Cruzvillegas*, Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow 2008, S. 2.

2) Der Songtext entstand während seines DAAD-Stipendienauf-

enthalt 2010–2011 in Berlin, zu Musik, die in Zusammenarbeit mit Gabriel Acevedo Velarde und Sebastian Gräfe komponiert wurde. Der Künstler beschreibt sie als «irgendwo zwischen der Drei-Saiten-Strategie des Punk, traditionellem Dub-Sample, der Schrilheit und Verlangsamung des Rebajada, Hip-Hop-Appropriation und tirolisch-tibetischen Elektrodigitalharmonien».

Siehe Abraham Cruzvillegas (Hrsg.), *The Self Builders' Groove*, Berliner Künstlerprogramm/DAAD, Berlin 2012 (mit CD).

3) Abraham Cruzvillegas, «Autoconstrucción», in Clara Kim, *Abraham Cruzvillegas: The Autoconstrucción Suites*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis 2013, S. 26.

4) Mark Godfrey, «Instability and Fragmentation / Improvisation and Autoconstrucción: Abraham Cruzvillegas's Sculpture», in *Autoconstrucción: The Book*, REDCAT, Los Angeles 2009, S. 69–70.

5) Siehe etwa McKee, «Mutable & Mutual» 1–3; oder Catalina Lozano, «Making Is Thinking, Thinking Is Acting», in Kim, *Abraham Cruzvillegas* (s. Anm. 3), S. 45–52, u. a. m.

6) Robin Adèle Greeley, «The Logic of Disorder: The Sculptural Materialism of Abraham Cruzvillegas», *October* 151 (Winter 2015), S. 82.

7) Milton Santos, *The Shared Space*, übers. v. Chris Gerry, Methuen, London und New York 1979, S. 86 (Original: *L'Espace partagé*, Génin, Librairies Techniques, Paris 1975).

8) Ebenda, S. 197. (alle Zitate aus dem Engl. übers.).

9) Cruzvillegas, «Autoconstrucción» (s. Anm. 3), S. 26.

10) Greeley, «The Logic of Disorder» (s. Anm. 6), S. 79.

11) Abraham Cruzvillegas, «Aprons», in *Autoconstrucción: Abraham Cruzvillegas* (s. Anm. 1), S. 82.

12) Bertolt Brecht, *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis*, edition suhrkamp 31, Frankfurt 1963, letzte Seite. Zu dieser Moral siehe Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, Verso, London / New York 1998, S. 175–178.

ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, *AUTODESTRUCCIÓN 7: DESHACIENDO EL NUDO* (Self-Destruction 7: Undoing the Knot), 2015, installation view Museo de Arte, Lima / SELBSTZERSTÖRUNG 7: DEN KNOTEN AUFLÖSEN, Installationsansicht. (PHOTO: MUSUK NOLTE)



DORYUN CHONG

# INTERCONTINENTAL MISSIVE

Dear Abraham,

I remember two particular moments when I was struck by something you said. The first occurred when you showed the film *AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN* (2009) in New York. During the post-screening Q & A, a gentleman in the audience raised his hand and observed that there is a certain “Oriental” (or did he say “Asian”?) quality to your film. The polite audience, myself included, shifted in their seats, feeling somewhat confused and discomfited by what sounded like a genuinely innocent but politically incorrect statement. You, kindly but also in a rather tongue-in-cheek way, said something to the effect of, “We are, of course, all Asians because Asians crossed the Bering Straits and settled in the Americas thousands of years ago.” And that was that.

Not long ago, I learned of this scholar in Korea. Although he officially specializes in Spanish literature, more recently he has been prolifically writing articles and books, and even lecturing on TV, about alleged connections between ancient Koreans and ancient Mexicans.<sup>1)</sup> He claims that certain early Korean tribes trekked from the Asian continent to the Americas to start new civilizations. One of the an-

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cient Korean tribes was called Maek (or Maek-i) and is believed to have lived near the modern-day border between North Korea and China, in the northeastern Chinese provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang, the area that used to be known as Manchuria. They, along with some other proto-Korean groups, are said to have established the semi-mythical nation Gojoseon (2333–108 BC) as well as the powerful, vast kingdoms of Buyeo (2<sup>nd</sup> century BC–494 AD) and Goguryeo (37 BC–668 AD). Goguryeo’s territory stretched far up into Manchuria and deep down into the Korean peninsula, pushing other kingdoms to its southern extremes. Through unexpected twists and turns of history, however, Goguryeo fell to its much smaller competitor, Shilla, which unified all of the Korean kingdoms in the seventh century AD. Since then, the Korean nation has been confined to the peninsula, and Koreans have grieved over the irrevocable loss of vast northern territories. The lost land has long been claimed by the Mongols, Manchus, and Chinese, and few historical accounts of these early sovereignties remain, other than in Chinese classical chronicles. The question is, where did all these vanquished proto-Koreans go?

This scholar claims that those lost proto-Koreans crossed over to the Americas—specifically, to Mesoamerica—between the tenth century BC and the tenth century AD (but in especially large num-



ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, *AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN* (Self-Construction), 2009, 1-channel HD video, color with sound, 1 hr. 3 min. / *EIGENBAU*, 1-Kanal-HD-Video, Farbe mit Ton.







ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, *LA MODERNA (The Modern)*, 2003, 6 sickles made of stainless steel, wood, wooden oar, paper, 8 3/4 x 35 1/2 x 32" / *DIE MODERNE*, 6 Sichel aus rostfreiem Stahl, Holz, Holzruder, Papier, 22,2 x 90,2 x 81,3 cm.

bers from around the fifth century BC for about 200 years) to establish civilizations there. How does he substantiate this declaration, you wonder? Much of it is via linguistic comparisons. First of all, there are the similar-sounding names of Maek and Mexica, which is how the rulers of the Aztec empire referred to themselves when they came into contact with the Spanish conquistadors. He has many other examples: The name of Mexica's language, Nahuatl, is derived from Korean *Na wa tadl* (I and everyone); Aztlan, the mythical homeland of the Aztec people, is in fact Asadal, the capital of Gojoseon; the Nahuatl word for mountain, *tepec*, comes from Taebaek, the tallest mountain located on the border between China and North Korea, which is often referred to as the spiritual home of the Korean people. He also found numerous cultural similarities, such as traditional cos-

tumes and body decorations. For instance, Aztec men kept their long hair in a topknot and sometimes wore a headdress closely resembling the *gat*, a tall cylindrical hat with a wide brim worn by literati men during the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1897). Both Korean and Aztec women painted two red circles on their cheeks and kept their hair in place with long hairpins, at times decorated with avian motifs. And so on and on.

Most, if not all, of these claims are not difficult for even non-specialists to debunk. Incredibly for a literary scholar, if not officially a linguist, he never seems to consider how pronunciations in any language change, evolve, and get corrupted over time, nor does he seem to reckon with unavoidable discrepancies that occur between two languages in the process of transliteration. That his archaeological or art-historical sources are drawn from sources that are

hundreds of years apart does not perturb him. For example, he compares without compunction a mural from Teotihuacan (approximately 1<sup>st</sup> century BC to 8<sup>th</sup> century AD) with an eighteenth-century Korean genre painting. Encountering another culture, we often rejoice in finding in it certain familiar traits we know about ourselves. We may even distort our own mother tongue and mold the foreign one so that they sound like one another. Even an allegedly serious scholar might fall prey to this desire for such connections and identifications, although I am tempted to think of this particular example as wishful thinking at best, and at worst, quackery.

Advances in archaeology and physical anthropology, genome mapping, and plate tectonics and ice-age geology together now allow us to fairly accurately pinpoint the period of Asian-American intercontinental migration to around fourteen to fifteen thousand years ago—in other words, far earlier than the alleged disappearance and out-migration of the proto-Koreans of northern territories. In this legitimately scientific way of establishing connections between peoples of the two continents, one relies on data derived from fossils and geological strata, carbon dating, Y-chromosome and mitochondrial DNA haplogroups, and arctic and even underwater archaeological digs and finds. Even so, we may never know conclusively who from where crossed over exactly when for what reasons and purposes. The crucial evidence that can answer the questions once and for all

may be long gone. I cannot deny, however, that part of me finds that this realistic, fatalistic acceptance of the limits of science makes the self-confidence of the pseudo-linguistics and chronology-busting comparative morphology rather alluring. No?

The second comment of yours that has stayed with me came up during a conversation we had in Berlin, several months after the New York episode. You were speaking about Antonin Artaud's time in Mexico, and his quest to experience the Tarahumara people's peyote dance. You described this as a desire to experience a time and culture unadulterated by modernity, which might open the door to a fundamental insight into the production of human knowledge and language. For you, Artaud's expedition exemplified a longing to find one's own identity rather than seeking to belong to a group not of one's own origin. Every search is always ultimately about the seeker himself.

I thought of this again recently, when you wrote to me that—as you have said previously in other contexts—you feel that every object of yours is “alive, has opinions, will, and attitude, with which it participates in a dialogue with other objects, things, events, persons, animals, and so on.”<sup>2)</sup> This immediately made me recall some of my favorite objects by you, which date from 2002 and 2003: *LA POLAR (North Star)*, an upturned photo umbrella sprouting peacock and pheasant feathers from its rim; *LA MODERNA (The Modern)*, six sickles whose sharp ends converge on



ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, *NUUESTRA IMAGEN ACTUAL: ROLLO (Our Real Image: Rollo)*, 2012, vinyl paint, ink on water based acrylic, enamel on kraft paper, 18 1/8 x 157 1/2" / *UNSER WIRKLICHES BILD: ROLLO*, Vinylfarbe, Tinte auf wasserbasierter Acrylfarbe, Email auf Packpapier, 300 x 400 cm. (PHOTO: ESTUDIO MICHEL ZABÉ)



ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS, *AUTODESTRUCCIÓN 8: SINBYEONG*, (Self-Destruction 8: Sinbyeong), 2015, found objects from redevelopment areas in Seoul, variable dimensions, installation view Art Sonje Center / SELBSTZERSTÖRUNG 8: SINBYEONG, gefundene Gegenstände aus Sanierungsgebieten in Seoul, Masse variabel, Installationsansicht.

(PHOTO: KIM TAEDONG)

a single point on a wooden oar; and AEROPUERTO ALTERNO (Alternate Airport), a bundle of knives of various sizes stuck on a round wooden block standing on three long legs. I have always felt that the elegance of these works relies in large part on the simplicity of their construction: two found things brought together in an alchemical marriage. Through the governing principles of balance and gravity, the unions transform into whole other beings—a constellation, a machine-for-living, and an agave plant, perhaps. At the same time, I like to think of them as shamanic objects that wield great powers, even though they may not be made from precious materials—like the staff of the Tarahuraman medium with whom Artaud became obsessed, or the mundane walking stick he believed to belong to St. Patrick.

Shamans continue to exist in certain contemporary societies, such as Korea and Mexico. They cannot be wiped out by modernity because the lands from

which they spring forth still demand their mediation, and the animistic force that endows things with life has not been expunged. Lands like these are haunted by brutality and precariousness—the brutal order of humans and things that shifts often and irreversibly as if in seismic jolts, and the two somehow managing time and again to be in a precariously balanced co-existence or a prolonged suspension rather than in a rigid hierarchy. Modernized citizens of these lands

submit, helplessly and yet willingly, to autochthonic (autoconstructive?) forces. They deal with the dark yet liberating forces by employing shamans to fall, on their behalf, into a “divine illness,” when the appointed mediums speak in tongues, can change gender, and even leap over gorges of time and culture.

This somehow leads me to think of the first major work you exhibited in Korea, an AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN you made for the 2012 Gwangju Biennale. In it, you transposed a methodology of gathering, recycling, and repurposing from your neighborhood of Ajusco, outside Mexico City, and imbued it, as you did in the original context, with an “ethics of mutual assistance and cooperation, and of alternative economies,” as one writer put it.<sup>3)</sup> This new application made sense given the historical victimhood, disenfranchisement, and resistant solidarity that permeate Gwangju. But for me, the artworks you made there were not so much the results of a “community” act but rather pulled themselves together, as if by gravity, into their own ragtag wholeness. They were less organized than self-organized—or “self-constructed.” They were themselves beings, not shamanic objects but shamans. All your AUTOCONSTRUCCIÓN works may have been so, but perhaps I had that realization finally when I saw one in a place that I knew had so many unresolved grievances, mournings, and . . . ghosts.

I like to think that the series of giant calligraphic paintings of simians you made with a broom, following your first couple of trips to Korea—and which you presented in the exhibition “Nuestra imagen actual” (Our Current Image) in 2012—as arising from a kind of divine illness, a shamanic possession. At the time, you said that in Korea, “I recovered not only my love for calligraphy and drawing, but also the pride for my opposable thumbs and my humbleness in the face of the fierce and destructive nature that stirs within us.” Furthermore, you said, despite or because of the heightened fear and fatigue in today’s Mexico, “I would like to recover for myself the pride in being an animal, a beast, or a monkey.”<sup>4)</sup> While I do not fully grasp the statement on a rational level, I sense that you made an intuitive linkage—possessed vision?—between drawing (the most basic artistic act), human evolution, and the id, while intercontinentally shut-

ting between two far-off places. And what resulted from it is a visual language that might be easily recognizable but still on the margin of intelligibility. I do not feel that you painted monkeys simply because of your realization that you are a monkey.

Perhaps it is in this altered state that you returned to Korea to stage your most recent exhibition, an installation that you decided to call AUTODESTRUCCIÓN 8: SINBYEONG, using the Korean word for “divine illness” as subtitle. You have been employing the antonymic term *autodestrucción* (self-destruction) in place of *autoconstrucción* (self-construction) as a title more often of late. On the surface, the methodology of gathering the flotsam and jetsam of a place and assembling them seems more or less the same. Is it then your own altered state that dictates whether it is destroying, rather than building, the self? The self as nonhuman, as simian?

One of these days, I may find the right approach to probe your encounters, identifications, and possessions in what may be your original homeland, and what you brought home from them. Maybe I will never find the proper words, nor will you. Then perhaps we can try to speak our own mother tongues and see if we may find an unexpectedly liberating common language amid a divine illness.

Yours,  
Doryun

1) The scholar, Son Seong-tae, has published an extensive list of Internet-based articles in addition to books. Among the sources I perused are the two-part article “Unusual Claim by a Scholar of Meso- and South America: Native Americans are Koreans,” originally published in the November and December 2012 issues of *Monthly Chosun* magazine, [www.monthly.chosun.com/client/news/viw.asp?ctcd=&nNewsNumb=201211100049](http://www.monthly.chosun.com/client/news/viw.asp?ctcd=&nNewsNumb=201211100049) and [www.monthly.chosun.com/client/news/viw\\_contentA.asp?nNewsNumb=201212100054](http://www.monthly.chosun.com/client/news/viw_contentA.asp?nNewsNumb=201212100054) (accessed August 26, 2015).

2) Abraham Cruzvillegas, e-mail correspondence with the author, July 6, 2015.

3) Colin Perry, “Abraham Cruzvillegas,” *Frieze* (April 2015), [www.frieze.com/issue/review/abraham-cruzvillegas1/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/abraham-cruzvillegas1/) (accessed August 26, 2015).

4) Abraham Cruzvillegas, quoted in the press release for the exhibition “Nuestra imagen actual: autorretratos recientes” (Our Real Image: Recent Self-Portraits), 2012, Kurimanzutto, Mexico City, [www.kurimanzutto.com/en/exhibitions/nuestra-imagen-actual-autor retratos-recientes-abraham-cruzvillegas](http://www.kurimanzutto.com/en/exhibitions/nuestra-imagen-actual-autor-retratos-recientes-abraham-cruzvillegas) (accessed August 26, 2015).